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ABSTRACT

A case study of Alonzo A. illustrates the danger of a monocultural approach to education and provides a living example of the impact of marginalization and alienation on the lives of persons of color. Born in Mexico and raised by grandparents in California, Alonzo dropped out of school in the eighth grade and joined a gang. He was a heroin addict at 16, a convicted felon at 17, and became an alcoholic after kicking his heroin addiction. At 32 years of age, Alonzo was completing his third prison term. Unable to read, all he had learned (with the help of another inmate) was to print his name with difficulty. During and after participation in a work furlough program, he attended Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings which he took to immediately. During his school years Alonzo had developed an extraordinary capacity for memorization that helped him conceal his illiteracy and to pass from grade to grade. Using this capacity, he memorized the passages of text read aloud by various members before each meeting, so that when it came his turn he could recite the text while pretending to read the words. He finally confided to a friend in the program that he could not read. Later, he took adult education night classes and passed his high school equivalency test. Alonzo's change in attitude after joining AA is striking and stems in part from his feeling of belonging--a feeling he never felt in school. It was only when he became part of a literate community that he considered valuable, and that considered him valuable, that he gained the desire for literacy. Alonzo's story illustrates the real nature of the "literacy crisis" and it illustrates the danger of the assumption that literacy is somehow removed from the values of the culture in which it is embedded. (RS)

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"Faith in the Reality of Belonging": The Story of Alonzo A.

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This is Alonzo's story. It is also a case study in adult literacy, one which, I believe, illustrates the danger of a monocultural approach to education. His story provides us with a living example of the impact of marginalization and alienation on the life of persons of color. It also provides one possible solution to our current crisis in education.

I first met Alonzo in August of 1980 when he entered the Work Furlough Program where I had been employed since July of that year as a Caseworker. When I found that he had been assigned to my caseload, I must admit, I felt a little trepidation -- how was I to communicate with this man, a heroin and alcohol addict, gang member and convicted felon? (At that time I was much more influenced by the cultural mythologies surrounding the lives of "criminals" than the reality of them. It was not until I had worked with them directly for quite a while that I began to see them as real human beings.)

Prior to Alonzo's arrival, I read his Cumulative Summary (called a "Cum-Sum" in Correctionsese) -- a

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compilation of his arrest record, copies of pertinent documents, and a brief biography. Here was a man who at seventeen had been convicted of his first felony. Now, at thirty-two, he was completing his third prison term.

Alonzo was born in Mexico. At the age of six he was sent to live with his maternal grandparents in the United States following the death of his parents in an automobile accident. The biography contained a history of Alonzo's drug addiction and alcoholism. A heroin addict at sixteen, Alonzo had succeeded in "kicking" heroin in his late twenties only to replace that addiction with an alcohol addiction. At the time that I met him, Alonzo had been a practicing alcoholic for seven years. He had received two disciplinaries while in the institution for possession of "pruno," an alcoholic beverage made of, as Alonzo put it, "anything that ferments." It is jokingly called "pruno" because fruit is most often used, and prunes are always available in the prisons.

As I looked at his picture -- the official "mug-shot" taken at the time of Alonzo's last arrest -- I thought to myself, "Well, he doesn't look that dangerous." (When I look back on it now, I realize that, far from looking dangerous, Alonzo simply looked very tired.) I prepared myself for his arrival on the following day.

When Alonzo arrived at the facility, accompanied by two uniformed Corrections Officers, I was more than a little surprised. A rather short, slight built man, his boyish

face made him look much younger than his thirty-two years. He was very shy and spoke only when asked a direct question. He kept his eyes averted in a way that made me suspect that he was hiding something. I was soon to learn the real reason for his reticence.

I read him the house rules, got information on work experience he had had, and informed him of what would be expected of him during his three month stay with us. Then came the part that Alonzo had been dreading -- the reading and signing of intake forms. I did not know, then, how humiliating this experience was for him. He looked up briefly at me when I put the first form in front of him. "Refusal to sign," I said, "will disqualify you from participation in the program. Please read the form and sign it." He sat silently, looking at his hands. At last, in a voice so soft I could barely hear him, he said, "I can't read." "I can read it to you," I said. "You can sign your name with an 'x', and I'll witness it." "I can write my name," he said. I was to learn later than Alonzo had learned to write the letters of his name by having another inmate write them out and then copying the letters over and over again until he had memorized the position of each one. He printed each letter carefully, taking time to make sure they were placed correctly. He repeated this procedure with each form to be signed. One of the first entries in my book of case notes was, "Alonzo can neither read nor write. He

can, however, print his name -- with difficulty."

One of my duties as Caseworker was to take residents with histories of drug and alcohol abuse to open meetings of Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous. Alonzo was soon added to the list of those who would be asked to attend. (They were not forced to attend these meetings unless they were found to be drinking or using drugs while in the program.) I asked Alonzo if he would like to attend a meeting, and he said he would. After his first meeting, Alonzo continued to attend A.A. -- he said he felt more comfortable there than in N.A. -- as many as three times a week. He went each time I took a group and soon had A.A. members picking him up at the facility to take him to meetings. He became enthusiastic about sobriety and spoke often with me about how much he liked A.A.

As the weeks passed, and Alonzo began to feel more comfortable with me, he slowly began to tell me his story. After the death of his parents, Alonzo was sent to live with his grandparents in California. Though they had been in the United States many years, and owned a fairly successful business, they spoke only rudimentary English. Only Spanish was spoken in the home. Alonzo was sent to school and found a few friends among the other Spanish-speaking children. He learned to speak English quickly but never learned to read beyond the ability to identify individual letters.

Because Alonzo's home and neighborhood were almost exclusively Spanish-speaking, he had little opportunity to

practice the language skills he learned in school. Most of the teachers at his school, he told me, were white. He succeeded in passing each grade by developing an extraordinary capacity for memorization and a reputation for being uncooperative. This, he told me, kept the teachers from calling on him to participate in the classroom. Alonzo left school in the eighth grade and joined a neighborhood gang. Here he found a community in which he could participate fully. No one cared, he said, whether he could read or write. At school he had always felt left out, full of shame that he lived with his grandparents, and they spoke only Spanish. The language of school was foreign to him. As a gang member he was accepted for who he was. The rest of Alonzo's story I knew from reading his file.

Alonzo stayed clean and sober and did very well while in Work Furlough. When he was released he told me he would stay in touch. He did. I can still remember the day that he came to visit me, three years after his release. We had been in touch during those three years, but only through brief phone calls letting me know he was doing all right and was still attending A.A. He walked into my office with a smile on his face. "Look!", he said, handing me a small piece of paper. I glanced down at the paper wondering what could have made him so happy. It was a certificate stating that Alonzo had passed his high school equivalency test. "This is wonderful!", I said, "How did you do it?" He sat down and told me what had happened in those three years.

Alonzo's participation in A.A. had had an unexpected side-effect: He had become literate.

All A.A. meetings begin with readings from the book, Alcoholics Anonymous. Readers are chosen at random by the leader prior to the start of the meeting. The first time Alonzo was asked to read, he declined, without explanation. He felt very uncomfortable and hoped that his refusal would not alienate him from the group. He decided then that he would memorize the readings so that the next time he was asked to read, he could recite the text while pretending to "read" the words. Alonzo's ability to memorize the spoken word had become so well-developed that, within a week -- attending two meetings a day -- he felt fairly sure he could recite any of the texts verbatim.

This is how Alonzo's literacy began. Each time he was asked to read, Alonzo would recite the text while following the words on the page. He found, as time passed, that he was able to pick up more and more words, actually read them. He was so excited by this discovery -- he had always feared that he lacked the ability to read -- that he was emboldened to share this exciting new discovery with a close A.A. friend. This, however, also necessitated a confession of his illiteracy.

All his life, Alonzo had feared that when people found out he couldn't read or write they would reject him, thinking him stupid. The old fear resurfaced when Alonzo anticipated telling his friend. While sitting at coffee

after a meeting one evening, Alonzo knew the time had come. "The beginning was the hardest," Alonzo told me. "Just saying out loud to somebody who wasn't an convict that I couldn't read was real hard."

But Alonzo did tell his friend. He told him everything: his fear of rejection, how he had managed to conceal his illiteracy, and his exciting new discovery. The feared rejection did not come. Instead, something Alonzo had not anticipated happened -- his friend offered to spend time with him each week helping him learn to read. And he did learn.

After that, Alonzo began taking adult education classes at night, improving his reading skills and learning to write. This was a long, slow process for him, and many times he felt he would never be able to do it. "What made me keep trying was that I wanted to really be a part of A.A.," Alonzo told me that day. "To be able to read Chapter 5 and the Traditions and not just say them from memory. And I wanted to be able to write my inventory and share it with my sponsor."

Alonzo's story brought tears to my eyes that day. Success stories like his are rare in Work Furlough. The majority of the residents in Work Furlough programs return to prison, many within six months. This extraordinarily high rate of recitivism is due largely to a return to drugs and alcohol -- and the inevitable return to crime.[1]

The importance of Alonzo's story here is not its

divergence from the norm, the fact that Alonzo stayed clean and sober and did not return to prison -- though its implications for those involved in our current "drug war" are obvious -- but its implications for the study of literacy and the context in which it occurs. Clearly Alcoholics Anonymous provided a catalyst for Alonzo, gave meaning to the need for literacy, a reason for learning to read and write that outweighed his fear of failure. This catalyst was Alonzo's desire to participate fully in the A.A. community. However, something occurred prior to the kindling of that desire. Alonzo felt accepted by the community. His experience was considered valuable, and his contributions important. Alonzo had begun to have, what Brian Stock calls, "faith in the reality of belonging."[2]

This, I believe, is the component which is lacking in our beleaguered educational system. We fail to acknowledge the experience of the individual and fail to represent how that experience is valuable to the larger community. What is learned in school is only that -- "school learning." The failure of the educational system to provide Alonzo with a sense of belonging and personal value is not surprising.

Herbert Kohl, educator and member of the Council on Interracial Books for Children, describes the difficulties of teaching in Harlem in the 60's, the years Alonzo was attending grammar school in California.[3] Kohl describes being forced to use texts such as Herbert Townsend's Our America, a text similar to those used in Alonzo's school.

Townsend's text speaks of slavery in most egregiously racist terms:

> Most Southern people treated their slaves kindly. It was true that most slaves were happy. They did not want to be free. The people of the North did not understand this.

Another text Kohl quotes is the Social Geography series by Branon and Gayney which states:

> Nicaragua and Guatemala are very much alike in that about 85 percent of the population is Indian or lower-class Spanish of mixed race. These people are quarrelsome and therefore lacking in progress. Uruguay is a progressive country. Most of its people are white.

This is hardly the "stuff" of identification for young students of color. It would be nice to think that so many years later things would have changed. This is simply not the case. As Kohl says:

> [in 1964] There simply were no texts or children's books with which my students could identify ...the problems the council took on twenty-five years ago still resist solution. The council has survived for twenty-five years. It has never been well funded and its publications have not been widely distributed.

Identification is the key word here. Kohl did not have access to books his students could identify with, identification in the Burkean sense, a recognition that another person or group is similarly constituted, a recognition that one is "consubstantial" with that person or

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group.[4] Kohl's experience of trying to teach inner city black children using texts which are openly racist is the antithesis of identification. Texts such as these serve both to alienate and marginalize. Alonzo's story speaks to this issue in a profound way. He did not identify with either the teachers or the material they taught. He chose to leave school in order to become a part of a community with which he could identify. He found this community among heroin addicts and gang members, others, like himself, who felt alienated. He could identify with these men, and, like them, the heroin helped him contain his frustration and anger, his feelings of personal powerlessness. "Whenever I slammed [shot heroin], I felt like nothing mattered anymore. That's what I wanted to feel," Alonzo says. "I hated them because they made me feel stupid."

Alonzo's change in attitude after joining A.A. is striking. This change in attitude stems, at least in part, from Alonzo's feeling of belonging, of being an necessary part of the group. And the development of literacy, I believe, is a very important component of this sense of belonging. The story of Alonzo's literacy has a very Freirian cast. Freire's model for adult literacy is one in which literacy in and of itself is secondary to the primary focus -- critical consciousness, a greater control over one's own life, the ability to participate in a larger community. Just as Freire suggests in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that we must begin with that which is meaningful

to the individual, that which is very much "present" in his or her life, so the A.A. texts and the A.A. members' stories spoke to Alonzo's alcoholic experience, which, at the time he entered A.A., was his most vivid, most "present" experience.[5]

In order to be meaningful, literacy must be for something, must have a purpose beyond itself. Scribner and Cole's study of Vai literacy illustrates this nicely.[6] Literacy among the Vai people "is acquired...without formal schooling" and is always acquired for a specific purpose: the reading of the Qur'an, conducting community business, and so on. Literacy among the Vai is also very much task-specific, "severely restricted," as Scribner and Cole put it. Both of these points, as we will see, are germane to my discussion of Alonzo.

Much literacy theory functions on the tacit assumption that literacy itself is meaningful, transcendant of culture and individual motivation. Alonzo's story refutes this assumption. His desire to become literate emerged from his desire to be a part of A.A., a fully contributing member of a literate community. His first real exposure to written texts was his exposure to A.A. texts, the encoded values of the A.A. community. Alonzo internalized these values; they became the focal point of his life. It is not surprising, then, that Alonzo choose to remain within the womb of A.A. by working as the manager of clubs in which A.A. meetings are held. As he said to me one day, "It's what I know

best." And Alonzo was carrying out one of A.A.'s primary directives: Work for the A.A. community; give back what was freely given to you.

Alonzo was not only initiated into A.A. through it's spoken and written texts, he was also, in a very real sense, bound to A.A. through these texts by his complete acceptance of the values they espouse. Because Alonzo's lifestyle changed so radically when he became a member of A.A., he completely rejected his previous life and completely embraced the values and culture which A.A. provided. I am not implying that Alonzo was somehow seduced into some sort of "cult of submission." My point is that his past and his temperament conspired to make him a creation of A.A.

Outside of the A.A. community, Alonzo's opportunities will always be limited. As an "ex-con" with a criminal record which includes armed robbery and possession of a controlled substance for sale, it is unlikely that he would be welcomed into the world of business with open arms. As an A.A. member he is a great success. "I'm respected here," he says, "I never got that on the street."

Alonzo's story illustrates the real nature of our current "literacy crisis" -- which, I believe, would be more accurately described as a crisis in values-- and it illustrates the danger of the assumption that literacy is somehow removed from the values of the culture in which it is embedded. While in school, Alonzo saw no reason to learn to read and write. As a matter of fact, the acquisition of

literacy through a predominately white school system espousing white, middle-class values, would be tantamount to "selling out," becoming "one of them." Alonzo was being asked to adopt the values of the other. It was only when he became a part of a literate community that he considered valuable and, more importantly, one which considered him valuable, that he gained the desire for literacy. Prior to that time, though he was occasionally embarrassed about his inability to read and write, Alonzo did not find a sufficiently compelling reason to become literate and, instead, found many more reasons not to. (The great irony here is that A.A. is a bastion of white, middle-class values).

There is something to be learned from Alonzo's story. Though he became literate and is a productive member of Alcoholics Anonymous -- the circumscribed community in which he lives and works -- I often wonder what his story would have been like had he been given the opportunity at a young age to learn to read and write within a meaningful, empowering context and to celebrate his own cultural heritage and values.

Notes

[1]1990 Federal Bureau of Statistics figures estimate both recitivism and drug and alcohol related crime at 86%, though some say 90% is a more accurate figure.

[2]Stock, Brian. *Listening for the Text.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Press, 1990, p. 37.

[3]Kohl, Herbert. "Staying Alive." *The Nation.* April 15, 1991, pp. 495-497.

[4]Burke, Kenneth. A Rhetoric of Motives. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1967, p. 55.

[5]Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Seabury, 1968.

[6]Scribner S. & Cole M. "Unpackaging Literacy." *Writing: The Nature, Development, and Teaching of Written Communication, Volume 1, Variation in Writing: Functional and Linguistic Cultural Differences,* M. Whtieman, ed. Lawrence Earlbaum, 1981, pp. 71-87.